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The White Caps of New Mexico: A Study of Ethnic Militancy in the Southwest

Robert W. Larson

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SEVEN DECADES BEFORE the Chicano movement began, an organization of masked, native night riders resisted Anglo land encroachers in territorial New Mexico. These New Mexicans, called White Caps or *las Gorras Blancas* by their contemporaries, conducted raids on Anglos who threatened native-owned land near Las Vegas. Cutting fences and destroying property, they caused such havoc that on August 12, 1890, New Mexico territorial Governor LeBaron Bradford Prince begged officials in Washington to allow federal troops to patrol the area between Las Vegas and Lamy.¹ To some observers "White Capism" was so disturbing that they compared it to the campaign of terror waged by the Molly Maguires in the Pennsylvania coal fields during the 1870s.²

Despite the anxiety caused by the White Caps, historians have paid little attention to them until recently. As long ago as 1947

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¹ Walter John Donlon, "LeBaron Bradford Prince, Chief Justice and Governor of New Mexico Territory, 1879-1893" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of New Mexico, 1967), 225-228.

² James McParland, superintendent of the Denver office of the Pinkerton agency, to Governor LeBaron Bradford Prince, July 27, 1891, L. Bradford Prince Papers, State Records Center and Archives, Santa Fe. McParland was in a unique position to make such a comparison as he was the undercover agent most responsible for the undoing of the Molly Maguires. The Pinkertons were asked by the governor of New Mexico to investigate the White Caps.

Earl S. Pomeroy alluded to them in his monograph, *The Territories and the United States, 1861–1890*, because of the challenge they presented to effective territorial administration, but it was not until the emergence of the Chicano movement that historians began to take a careful look at this largely forgotten protest effort. Although primarily concentrating on the career of Governor Prince, John Walter Donlon has made available much information in his recently completed doctoral dissertation. Equally valuable was an article published in 1971 by Andrew Bancroft Schlesinger, who showed particular sensitivity to the attitudes of the Spanish-speaking people whose rights to the Las Vegas Community Grant were being protected by the White Caps. Robert Rosenbaum has also delved into the attitudes of these New Mexicans in a paper delivered at the Western History Association meeting in New Haven in 1972.³ Although their studies are valuable, none of these historians had access to the oral testimony of living relatives of the major White Cap leader, Juan José Herrera. Moreover, none of them examined the connection between *las Gorras Blancas* and the labor strife that was afflicting the rest of the nation during the troubled 1880s. Such an examination reveals a close relationship among the White Caps, the Knights of Labor, and the Populists, thus suggesting a greater degree of national influence in the predominantly Spanish-speaking territory than has heretofore been thought.

As “White Capping” is not unique to New Mexico, any study of *las Gorras Blancas* should begin with an examination of the other masked vigilante-type societies operating with this name at the time. Beginning in southern Indiana in 1888, the White Cap movement provided a vital link between the first Ku Klux Klan and the second. Influenced by the first Klan as far as dress and methods of punishment were concerned, these new masked riders achieved their greatest notoriety during the late nineteenth and early twen-

³ Earl S. Pomeroy, *The Territories and the United States, 1861–1890: Studies in Colonial Administration* (Philadelphia, 1947), 25; Donlon, “LeBaron Bradford Prince,” *passim*; Andrew Bancroft Schlesinger, “Las Gorras Blancas, 1889–1891,” *Journal of Mexican American History*, I (Spring, 1971), 87–143. Schlesinger dealt primarily with the local aspects of the movement, while this article stresses national influences. Robert Rosenbaum’s paper, delivered on October 12, 1972, was entitled “Por las masas de los hombres pobres: Las Gorras Blancas of New Mexico.” It has been published in Renato Rosaldo, Robert A. Calvert, and Gustav L. Seligmann, eds., *Chicanos: The Evolution of a People* (Minneapolis, 1973), 128–133.

tieth centuries. By World War I they had largely faded from view, while during the twenties their remaining activities were absorbed by the second Klan. The objectives of the movement varied from locale to locale, although the White Caps did place particular emphasis on moral regulation. Allegedly irresponsible or immoral poor whites were often their victims, many of them receiving floggings as their punishment. In such areas as Mississippi and north Texas, blacks were the major targets, while in southern Texas anti-Mexican sentiment was predominant. In northern New Mexico there was a different emphasis; White Capping was primarily used by small Hispano farmers and herders to protect their land holdings from Anglo intruders.⁴

The origins of the New Mexican land dispute date back to the Mexican period. In 1821, Louis María Cabeza de Baca received a grant from the Mexican government, which had recently won its independence from Spain. The award was part of an effort to colonize northeastern New Mexico and hold it against the westward surge of Anglo America. When Cabeza de Baca failed to establish a permanent settlement, the Mexican government, on March 23, 1835, granted the land to thirty-one petitioners and their families. By 1841 more families had migrated to the area, now an unfenced tract of land comprising 500,000 acres of woods and pasture land. Known as the Las Vegas Community Grant, the communal holding had the resources to make it an increasingly attractive agricultural and grazing area.⁵

Trouble for the grantees began when more Anglos moved into northeastern New Mexico following the American conquest. Many of those coming were ranchers who built fences to separate their beeves from the flocks of sheep belonging to the native inhabitants on the grant. Sometimes buying the rights of individual New Mexicans whose authority to sell was questionable, these Anglo newcomers initiated an enclosure movement which was accelerated by the introduction of cheap barbed-wire fencing after 1870. A similar enclosure movement in Texas forced most Hispanos off the land and into the ranks of wage labor by 1900. The same development

⁴ See Richard M. Brown's fact-filled "Historical Patterns of Violence in America," in Hugh Graham and Ted Robert Gurr, eds., *Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives—A Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence* (Washington, D.C., 1969), 70-71, 806.

⁵ Schlesinger, "Las Gorras Blancas," 93-94.

would have probably taken place in New Mexico if there had not been significant concentrations of small Spanish-speaking farmers in the irrigated areas of the territory.

The influx of Anglos into New Mexico increased when the Atchinson, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad reached the territory in 1879. The improved transportation provided by the Santa Fe meant eastern markets for wool, hides, and meat produced in northeastern New Mexico, and an outlet for the minerals mined in the mountains that bordered the area.⁶ Better transportation also brought to New Mexico the large corporate rancher, who was a menace to the Anglo landholder as well as to the native one. Threatening access to the limited water resources in this part of the territory were the large ranches, some of them the largest ranch companies in the West. They included the Scottish-controlled Prairie Cattle Company and the American-owned Illinois Livestock and Palo Blanco Cattle firms.⁷ An even more ominous threat to small settlers, regardless of their ethnicity, was the Maxwell Land Grant and Railroad Company. The people behind this enterprise had taken a modest private land grant issued in 1841 by Mexican Governor Manuel Armijo and, through clever legal maneuvering, had extended its boundaries to include almost two million acres.⁸ Legal challenges to controversial private land grants, such as the Maxwell grant, led to the creation of the Court of Private Land Claims in 1891. During its thirteen years of life, this court processed conflicting claims to more than 33 million acres of New Mexican land.⁹

Anglo settlers in Colfax County, north of Las Vegas, responded to the threat to their land holdings by organizing chapters of the Southern Farmers' Alliance.¹⁰ During the late 1880s these chapters vigorously challenged the assertion of the Maxwell Company that

⁶ Leo Grebler, Joan W. Moore, and Ralph C. Guzman, *et al.*, *The Mexican-American People: The Nation's Second Largest Minority* (New York, 1970), 47, 49; D. W. Meinig, *Southwest: Three Peoples in Geographical Change, 1600-1970* (New York, 1971), 43.

⁷ Frank D. Reeve, *History of New Mexico* (2 vols., New York, 1961), II, 210-211.

⁸ Howard Roberts Lamar, *The Far Southwest, 1846-1912: A Territorial History* (New Haven, 1966), 51-52, 141-146. For a particularly good account of the shrewd manipulations of the Maxwell Company, see Jim Berry Pearson, *The Maxwell Land Grant* (Norman, 1961).

⁹ Grebler, Moore, and Guzman, *The Mexican-American People*, 50.

¹⁰ The *Raton Weekly Independent* is a particularly valuable source for alliance activity in Colfax County. Bound editions of the *Independent* are in the Theodore B. Mills Collection, New Mexico Highlands University, Las Vegas.

alliance members were squatters on the land which they had settled. Hispanos on the Las Vegas Community Grant, also threatened by land-hungry outsiders, were provided with another kind of leadership, the secret masked society of *las Gorras Blancas*.

The organization of the White Caps was due to the initiative of one man, Juan José Herrera. A native New Mexican who had lived in San Miguel and Santa Fe counties, Herrera had departed abruptly from the territory in 1866, presumably because of some scandal involving a woman.¹¹ For more than two decades he resided in Utah or Colorado.¹² In 1887 he returned to New Mexico, settling in San Miguel County, where the Las Vegas grant was situated. Locating next to the Black Tree Trunk Ranch near San Geronimo, Herrera became angry when he learned that the Anglo owner had fenced off so much land that there was no room for others to graze their stock. During a visit with his recalcitrant neighbor, Herrera seized him and shoved him into a rain barrel.¹³ The incensed Hispano then destroyed the hated fences and, in so doing, took the first step toward the creation of the White Caps.

With the help of his two brothers, Pablo and Nicanor,¹⁴ Herrera, sometime after this first altercation, began organizing other victims of the enclosure movement. Those recruited were promptly placed under a solemn oath not to divulge any information about the new organization on pain of death. Seven loyal lieutenants saw to it that

¹¹ Letter from Herrera to the editor, *Las Vegas Daily Optic*, April 9, 1890, as quoted in Schlesinger, "Las Gorras Blancas," 104.

¹² Three reliable witnesses in communication with San Miguel County District Attorney Miguel Salazar testified that Herrera had lived in one of the two states before his return to New Mexico. (Salazar to Prince, July 23, 1890, Prince Papers.) Herrera's grandnephew, Thomas Quintana, was told by his mother that Herrera also spent some time in Wyoming during his long absence from New Mexico. Thomas Quintana of San Luis, Colorado, to Larson, Feb. 26, 1972.

¹³ Interview with Mrs. Ruth Brito, Herrera's great grandniece, and her son and daughter-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Al Brito of Denver, Feb. 27, 1972.

¹⁴ Pablo, a burly man with a flourishing moustache, once served a sentence for murder. Miguel A. Otero, *My Life on the Frontier, 1882-1897: Death Knell of a Territory and Birth of a State* (2 vols., Albuquerque, 1939), II, 250-251. Pablo's living relatives insist that he was unjustifiably accused of knifing a person during a fight and, therefore, had to flee to avoid an unfair prosecution. He hid in the hills around Las Vegas for twelve years. Charles A. Siringo, the famous Pinkerton detective who investigated the White Caps, described Nicanor as the meanest of the brothers, but kinfolk of the two brothers dispute this contention. They assert that, although Nicanor could be ill-tempered, his flashes of anger were due more to his determination to stand up to Anglo intruders than to any nasty disposition. Interview with Mrs. Ruth Brito and her son and daughter-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Al Brito of Denver, Feb. 27, 1972.

rigid secrecy was maintained.¹⁵ The main objective of the White Caps was to save the Las Vegas Community Grant from being partitioned by Anglos into separate, fenced ranches. A number of newcomers were given the choice of either pulling down their fences or being "burned off" their property.¹⁶ Night raids on horseback were conducted against the more stubborn intruders, in which the avengers rode with white caps pulled over their faces to avoid detection. During 1889 and 1890 raids by White Caps were reported throughout three large New Mexico counties, San Miguel, Santa Fe, and Mora. By 1890 the membership of *las Gorras Blancas* was estimated at 700,¹⁷ and its activities had become known throughout the territory.

Where Herrera got the idea for his organization cannot be determined with accuracy. Since White Caps were being organized in other parts of the United States, Juan José may have borrowed techniques from one of these new secret societies. But because these organizations were formed after Herrera's return to the territory, it would have been difficult for him to have heard about them. Herrera's grandnephew insists that Herrera was influenced by the Ku Klux Klan, not the other White Cap organizations. According to his testimony, Herrera heard about the older and better-known Klan during a trip to Washington, and it was this visit that provided the inspiration for *las Gorras Blancas*.¹⁸

Authorities in San Miguel County were slow to respond to the fence cutting and the burning of barns, haystacks, and homes by the marauding White Caps. County officials finally took action on November 25, 1889, when they issued twenty-six indictments against forty-seven suspected persons, including ringleader Juan José Herrera and his brother, Pablo. By the second week in December there were twenty-three suspected fence cutters lodged in the county jail in Las Vegas.¹⁹ Agitation in behalf of those arrested be-

¹⁵ Salazar to Prince, July 23, 1890, Prince Papers.

¹⁶ Following a lecture that the writer gave on the New Mexico White Caps to the Colorado State Historical Society on February 15, 1972, he met a Mrs. Sherman who stated that her grandparents were burned off their property on the Las Vegas grant by the *Gorras*.

¹⁷ Salazar to Prince, July 23, 1890, Prince Papers.

¹⁸ Thomas Quintana of San Luis, Colorado, to Larson, Feb. 26, 1972. One gets the impression from Herrera's living relatives that Herrera was a restless man who moved and traveled a great deal. Interview with Mrs. Ruth Brito and her son and daughter-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Al Brito of Denver, Feb. 27, 1972.

¹⁹ Schlesinger, "Las Gorras Blancas," 98-99.

gan immediately and grew to such an intensity that the nervous sheriff, Lorenzo López, telegraphed Governor Prince for arms and ammunition so that he could protect his jail against mob attack.²⁰

The governor was slow to respond to these urgent calls for help, however. A trip to Washington in February to lobby for statehood was one reason for the long delay;²¹ a nervous breakdown following that trip was another.²² But the demands that he intervene continued into the summer of 1890. For instance, Prince received a letter from Benjamin F. Butler on July 9, 1890, in which the controversial ex-Union general reported twenty-five acts of destruction. As owner of 400,000 acres of New Mexico land, Butler demanded an end to the terrorism.²³

On August 1, the governor finally acted with a weak proclamation in both Spanish and English declaring that further disorders would not be tolerated. But Prince, realizing that stronger action was required, traveled to Las Vegas and arranged for a public meeting on August 16 to discuss White Cap disruptions. The governor learned to his disgust that four-fifths of those present were in complete sympathy with the fence cutters. Especially revealing was the support given by the majority to Félix Martínez, a prominent San Miguel Democrat. Martínez won acclaim when he demanded that the "land-grabber as well as the fence-cutter" be squelched.²⁴ But Prince by this time was determined to end White Cap terrorism. In fact, he had already requested permission to use federal troops stationed in New Mexico for patrol duty in those areas where depredations by the *Gorras* were most likely to occur.

The threat to the Las Vegas Community Grant was the major reason for Prince's failure to win widespread support for his effort to destroy the *Gorras*. Many in San Miguel County believed that Juan José Herrera's White Caps could end the encroachments on

²⁰ Territorial Chief Justice Elisha Van Buren Long and López to LeBaron Bradford Prince, Dec. 11, 1889, Prince Papers.

²¹ Prince, an avid statehood booster, had been in Washington, D.C., during the spring of 1890 with a delegation of twenty-nine New Mexicans who were lobbying for admission. He doubtlessly believed that the violence of the *Gorras* would hurt New Mexico's chances for statehood. Robert W. Larson, *New Mexico's Quest for Statehood, 1846-1912* (Albuquerque, 1968), 162-163.

²² Prince was confined to his bed for three weeks because of a nervous collapse. Schlesinger, "Las Gorras Blancas," 112.

²³ Donlon, "LeBaron Bradford Prince," 225.

²⁴ Schlesinger, "Las Gorras Blancas," 115; Donlon, "LeBaron Bradford Prince," 229-230.

the grant. There was another organization willing to help the native people save their grant, however. This was the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor, to which Juan José and Pablo belonged. As early as 1887 Knights from the local assemblies had organized the "Las Vegas Land Grant Association" to provide legal help for the threatened Hispanos.²⁵ Such action was not surprising since the Knights had long opposed land speculation. In the early eighties the national organization had demanded that public lands, as the heritage of the people, be reserved "for the actual settler; not another acre for the railroads or speculators."

In 1889, this stand was reiterated in a land plank drafted by the Knights in which they declared that "occupancy and use should be the only title to possession of land." Terence V. Powderly, the national leader of the Knights, symbolized the attitude of his labor organization toward the land speculator. Labor historian Norman J. Ware has called him a "land crank," asserting that Powderly's pronounced biases on the land question were as much the result of his Irish ancestry as they were of his awareness of the complaints of small American landholders. If free land in the United States were to disappear, there would be no escape for the land-poor Irish peasant with whom he still identified.²⁶

Powderly was made aware of the threat to the Las Vegas Community Grant by three local Knights who wrote him on August 8, 1890. Summing up the views of their fellow Knights, the trio asserted that many of the Anglo newcomers to New Mexico had built fences on the public domain "without the shadow of a title." Those who did purchase land legally more often than not "fenced in ten times as much as they bought."²⁷ Reports such as these must have aroused the labor leader's sympathies. But the empathy of the San Miguel Knights for the plight of the native grantee was tempered by the infiltration of the order by *Gorras*, who were allegedly subverting the organization's purposes. One result of this infiltration was unprecedented growth. Before 1888 there were only three assemblies of Knights in San Miguel County, but in that year Juan

²⁵ John K. Martin, Frank C. Ogden, and J. B. Allen to Terence V. Powderly, Aug. 8, 1890, as cited in Donlon, "LeBaron Bradford Prince," 233.

²⁶ Norman J. Ware, *The Labor Movement in the United States, 1860-1895: A Study in Democracy* (New York, 1929), 365, 367.

²⁷ Martin, Ogden, and Allen to Powderly, Aug. 8, 1890, as cited in Donlon, "LeBaron Bradford Prince," 233.

José Herrera became a district organizer for the Knights and the growth of the order was so rapid that by the spring of 1890 there were twenty assemblies. The new bodies were organized without charters from the national headquarters, however.²⁸ Governor Prince had a most unfavorable impression of this growth. In a letter to Powderly, he associated the increase in the membership of the labor organization with the upsurge of White Cap violence. Referring to a July 4 parade where approximately a thousand self-proclaimed Knights had marched, Prince asked Powderly if there were "anything like that number of real Knights" in this part of New Mexico.²⁹

The White Cap violence that Prince alluded to involved more than the publicized night raids to save the Las Vegas grant. The *Gorras* had also intruded into the field of labor relations in a way that disturbed many local Knights. For instance, on April 3, 1890, White Caps put posters in public places throughout Las Vegas in which they arbitrarily announced rates to be charged by workers for the cutting and hauling of railroad ties. A month earlier a group of 300 armed men chopped in half some nine thousand railroad ties belonging to the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe. Teamsters hauling railroad ties were sometimes stopped by the *Gorras*. If these teamsters were not charging enough for their services, their wagons were unloaded and their ties destroyed. As a result of such labor violence, the outraged officials of the Santa Fe declared on July 23 that they would no longer purchase crossties in the Las Vegas area. This decision would cost San Miguel County an estimated \$100,000 yearly and would put many rural laborers, including members of the Knights of Labor, out of work.³⁰

Resentment against Herrera and his White Cap infiltrators had been growing within the labor organization for months. It finally broke into the open during a tense meeting between Governor

²⁸ Schlesinger, "Las Gorras Blancas," 103. Because the *Gorras* had infiltrated the Knights, the growth of this labor organization was particularly distressing to territorial officials. Prince, in his August 12 report to Secretary of the Interior John W. Noble, expressed anxiety over the spread of the Knights into Santa Fe County. San Miguel District Attorney Salazar was concerned about the growth of the Knights in Mora County to the north. Salazar to Prince, July 23, 1890, Prince Papers.

²⁹ Prince to Powderly, Aug. 1, 1890, Prince Papers.

³⁰ *La Voz del Pueblo*, April 5, 1890, and *Las Vegas Daily Optic*, March 7, 1890, as cited in Schlesinger, "Las Gorras Blancas," 101, 109; Otero, *My Life on the Frontier*, II, 248-249; *Las Vegas Daily Optic*, July 23, 1890, as cited in Donlon, "LeBaron Bradford Prince," 236.

Prince and the leaders of the local Knights in August of 1890. At that gathering the head of the San Miguel Knights, Nestor Montoya, angry because the public had associated his organization with the recent labor violence, solemnly pledged that he would purge the Knights of its criminal element.³¹ As Montoya was obviously referring to the White Caps, an uncomfortable Juan José and Pablo, who were present at the meeting, denied any association with the *Gorras*. Three local leaders felt so strongly about this infiltration that they presented their grievances to Powderly in an angry letter. Believing that many of the new recruits to the Knights of Labor were responsible for the recent labor violence, the three Knights complained of the admission into their organization of an inordinately large number of "Mexican people" from the poorer classes.³²

Powderly was probably as chagrined about the reports of violence and property destruction attributed to his union as were the local leaders. Like so many utopian union leaders of the Gilded Age, he opposed the use of force, even putting the strike into this category. During the controversy over the Haymarket Square bombing in 1886, Powderly had been unsympathetic with the eight accused anarchists, even though they had been convicted on flimsy evidence and even though one of them, Albert R. Parsons, was a Knight. Moreover, the union leader had opposed a resolution presented to the General Assembly of the Knights which simply expressed sorrow for the anarchists who had been condemned to death.³³ In many ways the contrast between the two Knights, Powderly and Herrera, represented a growing schism within the union. Powderly's caution and his limited vision of the potentialities of unionism had alienated him from many of the newer, more tough-minded Knights. Herrera had apparently been exposed to this more militant union activity while he was living in Colorado or Utah. His uncommon organizational ability, as demonstrated by his leadership in the effort of the *Gorras* to save the Las Vegas Grant for native grantees and his rapid elevation to a district organizer of the New Mexico Knights in 1888, strongly suggests that he had earlier acquired union experience.

³¹ Schlesinger, "Las Gorras Blancas," 113.

³² Martin, Ogden, and Allen to Powderly, Aug. 8, 1890, as cited in Donlon, "LeBaron Bradford Prince," 233.

³³ Ware, *The Labor Movement in the United States*, 316-318.

The Knights of Labor had been busy in the central Rockies during Herrera's stay there. Strikes in the coal fields and strikes against such major railroads as the Union Pacific had made the decade of the eighties a turbulent one, particularly in Colorado. Herrera's radicalism may have been influenced by the most prominent western leader of the Knights, Joseph R. Buchanan of Denver. Buchanan had organized a branch of the anarchistic Red International in Colorado in 1883 and later managed a successful strike of Union Pacific shopmen.³⁴ Known as the "Riproarer of the Rockies," he was most active in the years just before Herrera's return to New Mexico, traveling widely and speaking to local assemblies in Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming in 1885 and 1886. If Herrera had not had the opportunity to hear Buchanan, he may have learned about his views in the *Labor Enquirer*, a widely quoted labor newspaper published by Buchanan and distributed throughout the Rocky Mountain West, including the Las Vegas area.³⁵

Herrera was capable of understanding the new ideas and attitudes regarding unionism which were being generated by the labor unrest of this period. His command of English was excellent for a native New Mexican; he once served as a translator for the New Mexico territorial legislature.³⁶ He also had a knowledge of Anglo law which was so thorough that many of his Spanish-speaking compatriots regarded him as an expert and sought his help when confronted with a legal problem.³⁷ This legal knowledge was undoubtedly useful to the White Cap leader in his effort to expel intruders from the Las Vegas Community Grant (the land-grant question in New Mexico was embroiled in legal controversy). Background in

³⁴ Ware, *The Labor Movement in the United States*, 310; John R. Commons, *et al.*, *History of Labour in the United States* (4 vols., New York, 1951; first edition 1918), II, 367.

³⁵ Gene Ronald Marlett, who is writing a dissertation on Buchanan's career as a labor leader, is convinced that a man with Herrera's awareness would have been exposed to socialist or radical thought in the Colorado-Utah area during the mid-eighties. Interview with Professor Gene Ronald Marlett of Rockmount College, Denver, Feb. 27, 1972. Buchanan boasted in the March 15, 1884, issue of the *Labor Enquirer* that his newspaper, without the services of a regular agent, had acquired a dozen subscribers in Las Vegas. The original issues of the *Laborer Enquirer* are with the State Historical Society of Wisconsin; a microfilm copy is available in the State Museum Building of the Historical Society of Colorado.

³⁶ Thomas Quintana of San Luis, Colorado, to Larson, Feb. 26, 1972.

³⁷ Interview with Mrs. Ruth Brito and her son and daughter-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Al Brito of Denver, Feb. 27, 1972.

the law also must have been helpful to Herrera in his capacity as a district organizer willing to employ labor tactics of questionable legality. Herrera, consequently, was apparently ready to assume his role as a catalyst upon his return to New Mexico. He was prepared to help his people resist the Anglo land encroachment and to improve their position in their dealings with such Anglo-owned corporations as the Santa Fe Railroad.

But the night raids and labor violence which catapulted Herrera to prominence and controversy during the summer of 1890 were followed by a marked decline of White Cap activity. As early as August 25, 1890, the *Las Vegas Daily Optic* observed a decrease in the incidents of fence cutting, attributing it to the fact that "few, if any, objectionable fences [remain] standing." Thus, the achievement of one of the society's major objectives was contributing to its decline. The increase of official opposition, as dramatized by Governor Prince's personal intervention, was another reason. The active political involvement of some of the White Caps and their associates from the Knights of Labor in 1890, however, may have been the major cause for the group's demise as a terrorist organization.

As early as 1888 some San Miguel Knights, led by F. A. Blake, editor of the *Las Vegas News*, organized a new political party in the county.³⁸ They called it the People's party to dramatize their differences with the so-called plutocratic elements of San Miguel. In the fall of 1890 Herrera and some of his White Caps joined the party, which eventually became associated with the Populist movement emerging elsewhere in the country. Herrera's decision to enter politics only widened the ideological cleavage between him and Powderly. Powderly had steadfastly refused to allow his national organization to get politically involved. Herrera, although he disagreed with this position, was convinced that he was as legitimate a labor leader as Powderly. Once boasting of his orthodoxy, Herrera had declared that "all differences that may arise regarding wages [should be settled] by arbitration between committees representing businessmen and working men in San Miguel County, in a friendly, . . . lawful manner." But he did insist that labor had a legitimate political role. "I will continue to fight . . . designing

³⁸ *Las Vegas Daily Optic*, Oct. 18, 1892. In this issue, Blake describes the founding of the new party and its first two years of activity.

politicians in a political way," he wrote in a public expression of his views.³⁹

Typical of Populist parties elsewhere in 1890, the San Miguel People's party, the first one in the territory, made an aggressive bid for power during the fall, electing its entire delegation to the territorial legislature.⁴⁰ Herrera's brother, Pablo, was elected to the House of Representatives.⁴¹ (Juan José himself was elected probate judge of the county in 1892.)⁴² But the most prominent Populist elected in San Miguel County was the real estate man and former Republican legislator, Theodore B. Mills. Although apparently neither a White Cap nor a Knight, Mills proved that the Populist movement in the county was sympathetic to the goals of the White Caps. After his election to the Territorial Council in 1890, Mills introduced a bill calling for rail regulation and presented a memorial from the businessmen's Commercial Club of Las Vegas urging protection for the Las Vegas Community Grant.⁴³ Because he was a third-party man, these two measures had little chance for success, but they did give legislative expression to two of the White Caps' strongest desires.

Political activity was to replace almost completely the early aggressiveness of the White Caps. Although the charge of "White Capism" was used by politicians as a synonym for violence for many years thereafter,⁴⁴ there would be no further reports of fence cutting and property destruction to match those of the summer of 1890. The electoral successes of the Populists during the fall of that year, however, were not followed by significant legislative or political victories. Although the newly elected Populist legislators from San Miguel held the balance of power between the two major

³⁹ *Las Vegas Daily Optic*, April 9, 1890. He was responding to a variety of charges leveled by Russell A. Kistler, editor of the *Optic*. Portions of Herrera's remarks are quoted in Schlesinger, "Las Gorras Blancas," 104.

⁴⁰ *Santa Fe Sun*, Nov. 8, 1890, copy in Mills Collection.

⁴¹ Pablo achieved his greatest recognition in the House when he told his colleagues that he had found more "honor, truth, and honesty" in the penitentiary, where he had served his term for murder, than he had in the legislature. Otero, *My Life on the Frontier*, II, 250-251.

⁴² *Las Vegas Daily Optic*, Oct. 13 and 15, Nov. 9, 1892.

⁴³ New Mexico Legislature, *Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Territory of New Mexico, 29th Session* (Santa Fe, 1891), 8, 117.

⁴⁴ As late as 1898 Republican electoral successes in San Miguel were characterized as a victory over the county's "White Cap gang." *Albuquerque Daily Citizen*, Nov. 12, 1898.

political parties when they began serving in December of 1890, they were unable to influence significantly legislation during that session.⁴⁵ Moreover, in its effort to gain political ascendancy in the territory in the 1894 election, the People's party did poorly; Mills placed third in his bid to become territorial delegate.⁴⁶ Evidently the tendency of territorial Democrats to usurp reform issues and the persistence of traditional voting habits in New Mexico were too much to overcome.

In the final analysis, the publicized night raids of *las Gorras Blancas* had a greater impact on the struggle in San Miguel County than the political activities of such White Cap leaders as Juan José and Pablo Herrera. Through their raids, the *Gorras* had effectively dramatized the plight of the native grantees in their effort to preserve the Las Vegas Community Grant. In response to the determined White Caps, the territorial legislature in the late nineties passed a law authorizing the incorporation of the Las Vegas grant.⁴⁷ Six years later, in 1903, the federal Court of Private Land Claims granted a patent to the town of Las Vegas giving it ownership of the disputed grant and full administrative control through a board of trustees created for that purpose.⁴⁸

Although *las Gorras Blancas* had exerted significant influence in bringing about a solution to the land question in San Miguel County, there is no evidence that the labor tactics introduced by Herrera while he was a district organizer for the local Knights of Labor had any major long-range effects on labor relations in this part of the territory. The decline of the Knights of Labor as a national organization in the nineties, however, had demonstrated that the times were not propitious for the kind of labor militancy advocated by Herrera.

The change in the course of union activity is manifested by decisions made by Powderly and Herrera toward the close of the

⁴⁵ Unfortunately for their cause, the six San Miguel Populist legislators in the House dissipated their influence by caucusing with the Democrats, while in the upper house the Populists did the same thing by cooperating with the Democrats in order to counteract the Republicans, who had majorities in both bodies. *Las Vegas Daily Optic*, Oct. 12, 1892; E. McPherson and H. E. Rhoades, eds., *Tribune Almanac for 1893* (New York, 1893), 292.

⁴⁶ The actual percentage of Mills's vote in the delegate race was a disappointing 3.77. Undated article from the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, Prince Papers.

⁴⁷ New Mexico Legislature, *Acts of the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of New Mexico, 32nd Session* (Santa Fe, 1897), 111-112.

⁴⁸ Schlesinger, "Las Gorras Blancas," 97.

decade. Powderly became more conservative, supporting William McKinley in 1896.⁴⁹ Sometime after the termination of the White Cap movement, Herrera left New Mexico and settled in Utah, where he died some years later.⁵⁰ But the historical legacy Herrera left is important. In the struggle of the native people of San Miguel to save their grant and exert some influence over their destiny, the role of the White Cap leader was crucial. He acted as a vital link, having apparently been exposed to the rising discontent of Anglo working-class people while living away from New Mexico and introducing many of their tactics for bringing about change upon his return. Most of these tactics, such as chopping up railroad ties and preventing teamsters from undercharging customers, employed violence or the threat of it. The urge to resist among the native people, however, was already there. To save their communal land grant, many Hispanos in San Miguel County were willing to fight; they only needed bold leadership, and Herrera and his White Caps provided that. Through the *Gorras*, large-scale organized resistance against Anglo-Americans was waged such as had not been seen in the territory since the Taos uprising of 1847. Although the results were not all that the native New Mexicans of the county wanted, they provided an example of resistance that would not be duplicated until Reies Tijerina's *Alianza* movement of the 1960s.

⁴⁹ Charles A. Madison, *American Labor Leaders: Personalities and Forces in the Labor Movement* (New York, 1950), 68.

⁵⁰ Interview with Mrs. Ruth Brito and her son and daughter-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Al Brito of Denver, Feb. 27, 1972.